

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Moshin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Penguin 2007)

The chief character, Changez, begins precisely as the author began, as an Ivy League New York city suit, of Pakistani extraction. The ‘fundamentalism’ about which he begins to be reluctant is revealed to be his lucratively rewarded recording of a company’s ‘fundamentals’ in his valuation report. Indeed the Chicago school of economics is a religion – one both utterly mad and extraordinarily dangerous. But having shaped the theme and title, Hamid’s love of puns comes on so fast you wonder whether the ‘delightful allegorical symmetry’ identified by the *London Review of Books* can permit the intrusion of any believable human being.<sup>1</sup> Enter Erica, American love interest. ‘I am Erica’ – Doh! If this is too cryptic, Hamid spells it out for you. Changez loves both Erica and America, but Changez despairs of both Erica and America. This transpires because Erica is seriously Hot, but goes nuts slowly due to being in love with a dead boyfriend – so that ‘I am Erica’ is stuck in the past, just like America. At this point there might be some cog missing in the delightful allegorical symmetry, given that ‘I am Erica’ is supposed to be in love with *the past*, rather than with somewhat freshly minted economic theory. Anyway, unable to deal with either Changez or changes, ‘I am Erica’ commits suicide, just like America ...

Beyond this ‘delightful allegorical symmetry’, the encounter with ‘I am Erica’ gives Hamid a chance to suggest how an Ivy League accountant on \$80,000 a year might fall out of love with the American dream. The process is only slightly foreshadowed by not wanting to look full in the face the suffering involved in asset-stripping, and only really begins when ‘I am Erica’ goes nuts and won’t see Changez no more. Changez is upset by this development. In fact, America itself is revealed to him as a mad empire. Changez still has an \$80,000-a-year job in that empire, but Erica’s insanity is somehow the madness inherent in the system – and one which severely curtails his access to sex. These are mere fore-shocks. The earthquake comes when Changez goes to value a publishing firm in Chile, and the publisher, not wanting to be down-sized, puts it to Mr hot-shot American that accountancy is from the Devil, and that he would do better to be with the Islamists. Changez, already all aflutter about ‘I am Erica’ then chucks the job and the empire, but instead of writing novels of undeserved critical success, he ducks out to lecture on the evils of America at a University in Lahore. That choice eventually attracts the interest of the CIA, and around this point I suspect Hamid is no longer writing what he knows. The story is told entirely in the first person by Changez, in extended address to a mysterious silent American sent to kill, arrest or watch him (we do not discover which). But this lone American is on Changez’s (re)adopted territory now – every street menaces, and in suggestion of the Arabian nights, it is not knowing who might be about to be shot or beheaded at the next interruption in the narrative which grips the reader to the next page – it *is* a gripping tale. I kept murmuring involuntarily ‘run soldier, run!’ This was as much to save the fellow and myself from Changez’s maundering self-justifications as from his knife.

That the pivotal character of Erica is a soggy sheet of cardboard need not trouble Hamid, since on the offered analysis the habits of America in economics and the Middle East

<sup>1</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, ‘Not Entirely Like Me’, *The London Review of Books* (29.19 4 October 2007) . ‘There’s an almost delightful allegorical symmetry to the flow of events, as well as a sensuousness and finish that might belong to some other form of art: music, perhaps.’ For musical reasons, ‘almost delightful allegorical symmetry’ is edited on the cover blurb to read ‘delightful allegorical symmetry’.

are similarly inexplicable. It's a nice point. But it's hard to regard this equality of incomprehension as insight. We see only into the singular figure of Changez, and there at his own estimation of himself, which reinforces an impression of the novel as a fantastically elaborated autobiography, and not a particularly insightful one at that. What minimally opens the book to the world is the suggestion, possibly inadvertent, of a hurt and possessive love for America at the core of Changez's anti-Americanism – which suggestion somewhat undermines the earnest 'political message' of the book. For it is fitting that Changez should regard his agitation against the great Satan as a way to re-establish contact with 'I am Erica', who he imagines watching him on CNN as he strikes some blow against Empire. The hotel rooms in I-am-Erica's heaven no doubt have satellite TV for exactly this sort of séance, and Hamid himself hopes, at the core of his polemic, that his mad beloved liveth forevermore – and will return from the dead to rescind her rejection of him, perhaps in the pages of *The New York Review of Books*.

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